

CONCEPTUALIZING SPORT CONSUMERS IN SPORT PARTICIPATION

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Aim

One of the major challenges for both commercial and voluntary sport organizations is the growing influence of consumer culture in the way people participate in sport. Still, little is known about the extent and the ways to which sport participants have adapted consumerist attitudes in their relationship with sport providers. The aim of this paper is to gain insight in the ways consumerism in sport participation should be conceptualized. With this knowledge, it should become possible to develop a measurement instrument for consumerism in sport participation.

Theoretical background

Sport management and sport marketing scholars have paid considerable attention to sport consumer behavior in media sport consumption (cf. Stewart, Smith & Nicholson, 2003). However, the sport consumer in sport participation has received considerably less interest. Sassatelli (2010) did study behavior in fitness gyms as expression of consumer culture from a critical perspective, but accounts of sport consumerism have not been studied within the field of sport management. Furthermore, the concept has not been used in relation to membership of sport organizations yet. This is striking, because the consumer is a prominent figure in sport policy nowadays (Van der Roest & Van Bottenburg, forthcoming) and worries about “the transformation of members’ participative attitude into customer behavior” (Enjolras, 2002, p. 373) have been put forward as well. It is however unknown whether people are indeed showing consumer behavior and to what extent they do so. It is also unknown what consequences this kind of behavior of members has for the organizational commitment towards their sport providers.

In order to understand consumerism in sport participation and to develop a reliable measurement instrument, a sound conceptualization is needed. This conceptualization should overcome the discourses about sport consumerism in sport policy (see Van der Roest & Van Bottenburg, forthcoming) and should focus on the meaning that sport participants, instructors and administrators attach to consumerist behavior. To understand the most important concepts of consumerism in other sectors, a literature review was undertaken. An important part of this literature review was focused on consumerism in public services (e.g. Clarke, Newman, Smith, Vidler & Westmarland, 2007).

Methods

Qualitative and quantitative research methods are used to further develop the conceptualization of consumerism in sport participation. The qualitative part consists of three focus groups with sport participants (2) and sport

instructors and administrators (1). In the focus groups participants are asked to identify the meaning of consumerism in their own sport organization. Participants are also asked to respond to the major concepts of consumer behavior that were found in the literature. The measurement instrument will be further developed using pilot testing in a web questionnaire. At this time, the pilot testing has not taken place yet. However, the results will be available at the 2013 EASM Conference.

Results, discussion, implications

The first results indicate that there are four major concepts that are important in consumer behavior in sport participation. The concepts of choice, responsibility, quality and criticism are deemed important in the conceptualization of consumerism. The concept of choice revolves around the trend towards increased flexibilization in sport organizations, while the other concepts relate to the expectations that sport participants have in their attitude towards sport organizations.

Even though the full results of this conceptualization are not yet available at the time of abstract submission, the preliminary results show that consumerism in sport participation is seen as an important trend that needs more research in sport organization research. The results of this study can be useful for sport management scholars as well as practitioners, because a reliable measurement instrument can provide valuable insights in the way people relate to sport organizations.

References

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